DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 112 895 IR 002 606

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TITLE The Politics of Evaluation and Accountability on the School Scene.
PUB DATE 29 Jun 75
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the American Library Association Annual Meeting (94th, San Francisco, California, June 29-July 5, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Decision Making; *Educational Accountability; Educational Administration; Educational Planning; *Educational Policy; Evaluation; Library Planning; Policy Formation; *Political Issues; Political Power; *School Libraries
IDENTIFIERS ALA 75

ABSTRACT

Politics of evaluation and accountability are not practiced solely by evaluators and accountants; everyone does it. This is because evaluation and accountability are fraught with decision situations which embody the potential to become political. Among sources of conflict in evaluation and accountability are questions of goals and priorities, economic matters, perceptions of evaluation and accountability by outsiders. Evaluation is also threatening to many school administrators and teachers; thus external evaluators have been employed by many groups wishing to evaluate school programs. The implications for the school media center focus on resources and policy-making, with an informal evaluation of the school library every time a budget is allocated. Librarians must become knowledgeable in the techniques of evaluation in order to provide policymakers with needed information, but must also learn how to apply these techniques in politically sensitive environments. (SK)

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The Politics of Evaluation and Accountability on the School Scene

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Presentation delivered at the Annual Meeting
of the American Library Association
June 29, 1975, San Francisco

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Unlike most other professions, politics is an art available to anyone and practiced by everyone. Teachers engage in it, doctors dabble in it and lawyers seem to be perfect at it. Some play it well, others do it badly, but interestingly enough, only the professional politician is said to give politics a bad name. Still, it is a very positive statement, since it implies something good about politics. Apparently, it's the politician that we must watch out for. Politics itself is a healthy activity to participate in. So it goes.

We are not surprised then to find that the politics of evaluation and accountability is not practiced solely by evaluators and accountants. Everyone does it. Yet no one will say that evaluators give evaluation a bad name. So who does--for a bad name it truly has. Couple it with accountability and the response is akin to near hysteria. One critic describes accountability as "a contrived smokescreen to confuse the public and distract attention from the real issues facing American schools." What have evaluation and accountability done to deserve such a bad press? Decision-making may have something to do with it.

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Where there is no choice, there is no decision. But where there exists the possibility of two or more alternative courses of action, there a decision situation exists--and interestingly enough, the potential for political confrontation and the ensuing conflict that usually accompanies it.

A decision situation is not necessarily political; it only embodies the potential to become political. This potential is realized when the decision situation attracts a following or a constituency and the question of who decides is raised--that is, who chooses. When this constituency is of one thinking and can easily decide upon the alternative course(s) of action, it has a membership working in harmony. But, as Bertrand Russell teaches us, "Conventional morality leads us to expect unselfishness in decent people. This is an error." So, the reality of decision situations is that they attract different constituencies pursuing their own selfish interests. Each camp seeks to influence the final determination of the decision and carries out partisan activities to ensure that its views prevail. When arbitration is difficult and the differences in points of view not easily negotiable, the politics of confrontation emerge.

Evaluation and accountability are fraught with decision situations. On the school scene these decision situations attract many constituencies bent on influencing the evaluating or the

accounting process in line with the preferences of their members. Each camp seeks to command credit for possible success but wield their power to avoid blame for any possible failure. The politics of evaluation then encompasses all activities carried out to influence the evaluation--which in some cases might mean preventing the evaluation from taking place. These activities are obstacles to conducting the evaluation and tend to distort the evaluation and its finding. In their most negative forms they result in a biased evaluation with useless findings. Political goals, however, may have been met.

The politics of evaluation on the school scene begins then with the emergence of conflicting views and the taking of sides to influence the final outcomes of the evaluation. What gives rise to different views and what brings them in conflict?

Do you believe that the goals of your school are already established or that the right to set such goals is already assigned to a specific group? Or, do you believe that school goals must constantly be negotiated among different power groups since goals appropriate to one group may not be beneficial to others? Should the schools focus on the development of skills, intellect, or morality; or can they accommodate all three values? The anthropologist Anthony Wallace tells us that conservative societies need skills to maintain the existing order and therefore give skill development a top priority. Ed Gordon of Columbia University observes that while

our schools are operated by a society which maintains the status quo, what poor people and minorities need is not maintenance of the status quo but radical change. Such change necessitates the development of an awareness for human rights and humanistic concerns, a morality, which is perceived as being developed by the intellectual function. "Thus," Gordon says, "the overall purpose of the school is not consistent with the basic needs of disadvantaged people."

If the goals of a school are already set and focus on the development of skills then evaluation takes the form of comparing goals and outcomes, the development of standards, and a dependency on the use of written tests. Where no such agreement exists, then the goals may have to be evaluated and investigated, usually carried out through a "needs assessment." The conflict between values inherent in existing goals and the values that determine new goals is compounded by the need to choose evaluation strategies for either set of goals. If this political process is not properly understood and appropriately dealt with, it can distort an evaluation that initially begins with biased goals.

Another major source of conflict in the area of evaluation centers on the purely economic question of resources and the benefits to be expected from them. Simply worded, the question asks, "Are the measured benefits of the program worth the costs, relative to possible alternative programs (including existing practices)?"

The opportunity for anyone to play the political game is now fully realized. Questions of priorities, efficiency, and effectiveness arise that are not easily solved by politics or present technologies. The questions raise problems that are incredibly complex in areas where we have insufficient knowledge. Yet someone will make a determination of priorities if by no other simple means than by approving a budget. As the researcher Carol Weiss states, "We are still in the business of policy-hatching on a trial-and-error basis in the absence of research knowledge." And,someone will also judge success or failure. But what measures will they use? And, who will decide and who will judge?

Conflict also arises by the way evaluation and accountability are perceived by competing factions. Although accountability overlaps evaluation, and is a form of educational evaluation, evaluation and accountability are not perceived to be the same. Both concepts are concerned with the effects of school experiences on students--'are the schools living up to their claims?' Evaluation, however, has tended to be associated primarily with educational effectiveness--'are we succeeding in what we set out to do?' This is usually an internal process conducted within the school system by staff for internal decision-making. Most decision situations in the school scene are therefore decided and judged internally. On the other hand, calls for accountability tend to come from outside the school system and include an external judgment. Although

accountability also encompasses effectiveness, its main concern appears to be with efficiency--'what are we getting for our money and how well are we getting it?' Accountability asks for evidence that supports the schools' claims of what they have done. It demands public exposure of the schools' internally-made decisions and opens a closed system to public scrutiny. It is acknowledging "the public's right to know what actions have been taken in the schools it supports and how effective these actions have been." Accountability is a process disliked by school people who see it as vindictive and a form of outside interference in their professional affairs.

I taught science and English at a junior high school in New York City where subsequent to my teaching assignment I served as the school librarian. That was only some 12 years ago and little seems to have changed in the expressed concerns of that experience. All students in the school were grouped in classes according to abilities, and subject classes were assigned to teachers by seniority--that is--the more experienced teachers taught the brighter students. Information for deciding in what class to place students came from standardized mathematics and English written tests. The special enrichment classes had an additional I.Q. requirement. Decision-making was quite a simple process and so was the process of evaluation. I was considered a successful and able teacher but was never informed that I had been evaluated. If it

occurred, I never knew about it. When I took over the school library I rose in prestige and status among my colleagues, again not because of an evaluation, but because I did not have any teaching assignments. From the view of my colleagues, the library assignment was a plum job.

While in my teaching assignment, like other teachers, I graded students and constructed tests. The quality of test construction and of grading suffered from a lack of knowledge about test construction and the absence of any policy on grading. At certain ability levels the brighter students were administered tests designed by the central Board, but their effect upon grades was a teacher's prerogative. The major component of a student's final grade I remember was the finagle factor--a judicious adjustment of the student's grade that took into account the weaknesses of his human character and the weaknesses of my technology. The practice in total was grading and some glorified the practice by calling it measurement. Few teachers, however, ever made the error of identifying measurement with evaluation. That was an error to be committed by the administration. For the most part, teachers did not make this mistake since they considered evaluation as something which was done to please evaluators.

And what about evaluation in the school library. Well, since I did not assign grades, my role was to help grade teachers' papers at final examination time and to provide space for teachers grading their papers. Evaluation never touched the library, or so it appeared.

In general, much lip service was paid to evaluation. The concepts, however, were seldom understood, and the procedures and techniques rarely used. What does an evaluation tell you anyway that you did not know before? There was a definite distrust of evaluation and doubts that it could accomplish anything. Why this feeling and has it changed?

We were all aware then of the limitations of our craft. The individual teachers were concerned with the gap between their expectations and their actual performance. The profession seemed to demand too much and we performed too little. This pressure upon teachers has not changed. We knew then, and still know very little about the nature of learning. When seen in their broader societal context we find that we simply do not have the knowledge to treat serious problems directly affecting the learning of large numbers of our population. However, what we do know is rarely applied. Measurement has its limits but progress has been made in its use for describing and assessing our problems. We know more than is being practiced and the reality, as DeProspo points out concerning evaluation, is that the art and skill of evaluation as practiced remains undeveloped--I would add untried. If known evaluation techniques are not practiced, then one should expect the "political realities" of life to fill the void.

In the past several years, at least five national commissions have examined the current scene in American secondary education. It's impressive to note what they agree on that directly concerns us today. First, they observe that high schools lack clear goals, which is not difficult to understand. The schools' primary objective is to educate students, yet the schools must politically interact with the community and demonstrate results of interest to the community. Everything they do is therefore not in the interest of the students' education. The schools, however, are still seen as pursuing "an exceedingly narrow task even though they are surrounded by multiple social demands." The commissions recommend that schools "define appropriate educational goals that go beyond the primarily cognitive and encompass a fuller range of human concerns." This recommendation declares that the goals are still not set. Obviously, some confrontation should be expected from those who feel the goals are already set. The conflict, however, does present the opportunity to employ available technology in evaluative research to conduct an empirical investigation of such goals. Such an approach would entail carrying out a "needs assessment" that provides everyone in the school system with information for initiating their own planning and evaluation. It can also assist in defining policy for the appropriate use and interpretation of measurement instruments used by departments in their evaluation efforts. And most importantly, a needs assessment can identify the required competencies lacking within the staff to conduct such evaluation tasks and point to needed training.

New goals imply new directions. The reports of the Commissions also recommend the establishment and support of pilot programs to try out some of these new ideas. They concede though that carrying out these suggestions will demand the use of new methods of evaluation and new measures that will gauge other modes of growth beyond the narrow cognitive measures now employed. Such new directions they concede are beyond the grasp of any single constituency and will require the participation of a variety of constituencies around key educational questions. One cannot escape the obvious truth that educational change is inevitably a political process.

The demand for more evaluation of educational programs is increasing. And, although evaluation can be of tremendous assistance in bringing about educational change, it is still threatening to school administrators and teachers. This may be due in part to a significant number of evaluations producing negative findings. But teachers and administrators are not defenseless, and when threatened can also play the political game of evaluation. The defense mechanisms employed by them are many.

Negative findings can be "explained away" very easily through rationalizations. If those for whom the program was designed do not benefit, others did, and without the program they could not have benefitted. Something good, so goes the argument, did emerge from the program. Or, if those who really needed the program did not participate, then the program's effectiveness cannot be assessed.

It is best, however, to head the evaluation off at the pass before it produces negative findings, and to prevent it from taking place at all. You can insist that what you are doing has long range effects and its effectiveness cannot presently be measured. Or, you can argue that the complexity of what you are doing just cannot be measured. If you do make the mistake of alluding to some small but significant results that you have observed, insist that available instruments cannot measure them.

If faced with the prospect of having to accept the conduct of the evaluation, the politics of evaluation will still provide you with some further defenses. The aim now is to employ some time-tested techniques to distort the final evaluation, rendering it useless. For example, pretend you believe in the merits of an objective evaluation, thereby promoting a favorable image of yourself. You are never going to do it, but it's the best "posture" to take for distorting the evaluation. Or, take a look at your present program and see where you are successful. Now select those aspects that appear successful and conduct the evaluation on them. If that "eye-wash" doesn't work, then try a good "white-wash." Where you note failure in the program, secure "testimonials" from people who like you and support your efforts before someone from the other camp proposes an objective appraisal. However, if the failures are major, then try the technique of "substitution" by shifting the focus to some minor part that has succeeded. And finally, delay

or prolong the evaluation as much as possible since in time everyone will forget what it was they were all concerned about. Also, "postponement" will remove that quality of timeliness that makes the information so useful. Do you recognize the game?

Most of us, of course, are familiar with the golden rule of the politics of evaluation--"Do unto others, as they would do unto you." Now, every once in a while, a program comes into existence that attracts too much attention to itself. From power interests within the administration or the school system emerge coalitions. Every now and then one of these coalitions will submerge and employ tactics of a "submarine." Their ultimate aim is to torpedo or destroy the program regardless of its worth. Their chief weapon is evaluation--the politics of evaluation.

What has evaluation done to deserve such a bad press? Because decent people, following their own selfish interests, abuse the concepts of evaluation and distort its findings.

When scientists assume that they can apply logic to the ways of nature they assume that nature is reasonable. A properly conducted evaluation assumes that rigorous methods of logic will be applied in its investigations. What is implied by these assumptions when they are applied to the refusal of administrators and educators to quantify objectives, that is, when they say that a particular

objective cannot be measured? It may imply a serious distrust of reason and the belief that logic cannot be applied to their own area of activity. This unreasonableness may have been a major impetus for the rise of the accountability movement.

I was able to closely observe the politics of accountability when following my school experience I served as director of a community guidance agency in Manhattan. The agency was privately financed and founded by leaders of the Puerto Rican Community in New York City to provide guidance services needed by Puerto Rican students who were not receiving these services in the schools. We talked a lot then about accountability, and also acted on what we thought were some reasonable assumptions. Interestingly enough, the model for accountability designed several years later at Educational Testing Service for New York City, was based on similar assumptions. The basic assumption of this model is that where educational deficiencies occur, methods can be found to eliminate or decrease them. Considering the billions of dollars spent each year on education, is this a reasonable expectation to assume? But let us not get diverted by the money issue, for that is only one aspect of accountability, and too much emphasis has been placed upon it. Our community's perception of accountability then concerned equality of educational opportunity and participation in the formulation of policy.

Our concern with equality of educational opportunity was obvious. Our children were failing to learn and the schools were not

responding. Drop-out and unemployment rates told us two things: (1) the problem will get worse with time, and (2) both the individual Puerto Rican and the community would get hurt--the individual Puerto Rican because he would not be able to achieve the standards expected by the larger society, and, the community because it would not be able to produce the doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other service workers it needed, including its political leaders. The frustration for the community was simple. It could not identify the authorities, be they individual or agencies, who were to be held responsible and accountable for the conditions in the schools. The answer therefore was obvious: Participation in the affairs of the school system for the purpose of controlling school policy--the direct application of the politics of accountability.

Our target was the central Board of Education. Using the facilities of the agency a verbal and capable group of professionals who were politically astute was organized to negotiate with the Central Board. One evening a month members of the Central Board met with us in my office to discuss policy and programs directly affecting the Puerto Rican student. We learned a lot, but it took us time. The Central Board consisted of some very decent but unresponsive human beings. They espoused some very liberal views and showed some compassion for our cause. But we could not achieve any results through them. I myself devised a personal theory to explain the impass. These people were truly not the power. They were only a buffer zone

for the real power hiding behind them. But it seemed to me that to be a part of that buffer zone the reward had to be very great or you had to be a masochist.

The next step of course is history. We were not the only group negotiating with the Central Board. Coalitions were formed and strategy was changed to control the local districts--the strategy of decentralization and the emergence of the noisy forces. I came to work for the College Entrance Examination Board 8 years ago and the confrontation continues.

And as a matter of fact, so it continues everywhere else. A study titled Governing American Schools was published last year on a research project that began in 1968 that looked at the political nature of the local school district. Of concern to us is the strong correlation between the level of political activity in a school district and the responsiveness of school board members to their constituents. The study reveals that American school boards are generally unresponsive to the wishes of their constituents, but in most districts the superintendent is so dominant that the unresponsiveness of the board is of little practical consequence. In fact, in political districts where school boards were willing to oppose their superintendent is where the study finds they were least likely to succeed in overruling him. How does one then make local schools more responsive to the people they serve? Maybe that is the true issue in accountability.

The technical assistance needed by community groups to evaluate school programs is increasingly being provided by external evaluators. The external evaluators' major interest is in describing what took place in a given education setting and judging what resulted from it. Their role is one of appraising educational procedures and results. This is slightly different from the major interests of administrators and teachers who use evaluation for the purpose of obtaining data on which to base decisions affecting students, and to determine the effectiveness of their programs. These are important differences that can be reconciled. The ideal I would think is for the external evaluators to base their findings on the data used by administrators and teachers in their decision-making. But this assumes the existence of an internal evaluation data collection system within the school system that is objective and dependable--which is rarely the case. "Teacher grades of students' performance are extremely unreliable"-- teachers do not correlate with each other in grades assigned to the same student." Outside evaluators, to meet accountability requirements in an objective manner, are therefore turning increasingly to the use of standardized achievement tests that depend upon national norms for the interpretation of results. The most widely used tests measure achievement in subject areas such as mathematics and English skills. From my view at the College Board I fear, as others do, that a dependency upon standardized tests might suppress areas in the curriculum that encompass humanistic concerns. Furthermore, the lack of understanding

of interpretation techniques by users of these scores produces some startling abuses, such as the unpardonable misplacement of Black and Spanish-speaking children in classes for mentally retarded children. Standardized tests used in elementary schools have been found to be by and large unsatisfactory. Strong criticisms are being made of their misuse for meeting demands of accountability. "A void is seen to exist between the demands of accountability and the present stock of standardized instruments." Although a test may cover a few program objectives, the tests are not designed with specific programs in mind, with a poor overlap occurring between the objectives the test measures and the actual objectives of the program.

Sometimes the accountability goes beyond totally "farming out" the evaluation. It can take the form of performance contracting where even the instructional activities are turned over to an external private firm along with the demonstration of measurable results on a standardized test. Proposed voucher systems and alternative educational systems are another form of accountability where parents are given tuition vouchers and allowed to choose and pay for their children's education at a school of their own choosing. These forms of accountability display a lack of trust in the ability of the school system to produce acceptable results and its willingness to respond to the needs of the community.

It may be that the concept of the external evaluator may not be workable. Evaluation is integral to planning and it makes little sense to separate the two. It makes no sense to develop evaluation techniques that, for whatever political reason, are not applied. Evaluations by external evaluation experts are being ignored, if used at all. For evaluation to have any impact, it must be practiced. And for it to be practiced, it must become part of the normal day-to-day activities and procedures of the practitioner--the on-line administrator and teacher. A possible solution to the dilemma might be to use external evaluators to audit the results of internally developed and operated evaluation systems and their results. The auditor of evaluations ensures that evaluations are properly carried out. "In general, the auditor looks over the evaluation plans, suggests changes if necessary, and, after amendments have been made, approves the plans. He monitors the data collection. Later, he checks some of the analyses to ensure that they have been properly performed. Finally he reads an early draft of the evaluation report, suggests changes, and approves the final version."

Are there any implications for the school media center, that is the library, in the accountability movement? The politics of accountability focuses on resources and policy-making. The existence of the school media center and the rationale for its existence are outcomes of policy formulated and arrived at by a political process. Every time resources within a school system are allocated, the final budget

reflects a re-examination of that policy. In many cases policy review interprets the media center as a support element to the more basic departments of instruction. The media center is perceived as not having a primary mission of its own, although much lip service is paid to the "hub," or center of the school. Right now many New York City schools have had the "spokes" removed from their "hubs." As a support service without a mission of its own, the school library is first accountable to the internal decision-making structure of the school--that is--the teachers and administrators it supports!

As a cost unit the school library becomes an item of accountability to community policy makers. Do they evaluate the library's contribution to the school's overall effectiveness, and if they do, what data do they base it on? Or, do they perceive the library as something nice that every school should have and leave it at that. There are limits to the ability of a community to support its schools, and instructional salaries are steadily pushing the available resources to those limits. Salaries are in direct competition with monies for materials and the materials budget includes classroom supplies as well as the media center's books, films, and equipment. So whether you see it or not, and whether it's being done in a manner that is fair, an evaluation of the school library is carried out every time a budget is allocated. And the process of allocating keeps getting tougher. Harder questions are being asked, but will the information be forthcoming?

Today's workshop was a most important step forward in designing evaluation systems for the school media center that also provides information for purposes of accountability. Goals were identified for the school media center that establish it as a primary instructional unit with a mission of its own. Such goals go beyond the support of the goals of other instructional units. As these goals become translated into an internalized evaluation system for appropriate decision-making by the media center specialist the information required for accountability will be forthcoming. The media center will be able to provide the type of information that is increasingly being demanded by policy makers, information that these policy makers can use to fairly evaluate the library and appropriately allocate the required resources. The allocation of resources to the media center will then be based on need demonstrated by objective evidence and not on an unreliable "friends of the hub" assessment.

The approach presented in today's workshop is one that was used to successfully implement evaluation systems to monitor the learning function of public libraries in nine cities. This approach places its major emphasis on the direct participation of librarians providing the service in the design of the system. It allowed librarians to perceive the value of scientific evaluation and reduced the distorting influences of political considerations. The final design is one that is used, one that provides the information needed for decision-making, but most important, one that directly serves the

immediate concerns of the on-line librarian and of the administrators. The extra added plus is that it also serves the community's concerns for accountability in a painless and highly satisfactory manner.

The approach takes time to implement and is not developed overnight. Librarians must first become knowledgeable in the techniques of evaluation. But that is not enough. It is as equally important to learn how to apply these techniques in politically sensitive environments--in some cases, explosive environments where expectations are high, performances low, and despair rampant. The technology of planned change encompasses important political realities for successfully employing the technology of planning and evaluation for bridging this gap. One technology can assist in introducing change, the other in managing it. Together these two technologies provide the school media center with the needed know-how for launching programs of change to meet the accountability concerns of students and of the community. What need is there to design and finance new alternative schools when the potential for such service exists within the present resources of school media centers! Voucher systems allow parents to select alternative educational systems of their own choosing for their children. A similar voucher system internal to a school system might be used to allow students to select alternative modes of learning through independent study by way of the school media center. The media center serving as an alternative school for independent study can bridge the gap in service to unserved populations within the school. If

schools continue to insist on organizing themselves to educate the mythical or fictitious average student, then school media centers might assume as one of their learning missions the education of the bright, the bored, the drop-out, the non-joiner, and the individualist who do not average out. Early warning systems can be devised to identify these students before they become a problem to themselves, the school and the community. School media centers serving them would then have missions of their own centered around learning modes and styles of independent study and specifically identifiable constituencies. For purposes of accountability, they would in most instances be doing something someone else is not and for someone that is being poorly served. As we all know, constituencies are very important in the politics of accountability.

Such a mission for the school media center is not foreign to the thinking of many librarians and there are many who support the concept. It is also not necessarily the only one. It is, however, an alternative when examining goals, objectives, effectiveness, efficiency and priorities. Today's exercises were meant to demonstrate the availability of a technology for dealing with such alternative missions and to provide a possible answer to dealing with the difficult problems raised by accountability. I hope that some of your needs as media center specialists have therefore been met.